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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [KV](#) [UNMIK](#) [PREF](#)
SUBJECT: KOSOVO: RETURNS DOWN SHARPLY IN 2008

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Classified By: Ambassador Tina S. Kaidanow for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. According to UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) numbers, only 569 persons returned to Kosovo in 2008, compared to 1815 returnees in 2007. This decline can be attributed to many factors, chief among them Kosovo's declaration of independence on February 17, 2008, which appears to have discouraged displaced Kosovo Serbs in particular and possibly other ethnicities from returning to their former homes. Underperformance at the Kosovo Ministry for Returns was another factor, along with the high-profile arrest of a Kosovo Serb who was on a "go and see visit" with other potential returnees. Relevant agencies, including UNHCR, the UN Development Program (UNDP), and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), all report that despite the challenges, many displaced Kosovo residents living in neighboring countries remain interested in returning. UNHCR also reports an increased interest in returns from the Serbian government. Our opinion on the most effective way to promote sustainable returns to Kosovo remains the same: avoid high-priced projects (which have a poor track record) and improve conditions on the ground for communities already here, making them more attractive to potential returnees.
END SUMMARY.

Numbers Drop

12. (C) According to UNHCR statistics, 569 persons displaced from Kosovo since the 1999 conflict returned in 2008, compared with 1815 returnees in 2007. Of these, 155 were Kosovo Serbs, 264 Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians (RAE), 33 Bosniaks, 85 Gorani, and 32 Albanians. The drop in Kosovo Serb returns (151 in 2008 vs. 585 in 2007) was as sharp as the drop in overall returnees. For political reasons, most if not all public attention paid to returns in Kosovo is directed at the issue of Kosovo Serbs. Although establishing an accurate count of displaced Kosovo Serbs has been a controversial and politically-charged issue since 1999, UNHCR and UNDP among others estimate that between 70,000-80,000 Kosovo Serbs have departed since 1999, most of them immediately after the 1999 conflict. (Note: Kosovo has not conducted a census since 1991, and estimates of displaced persons are rough at best. End Note.) A UNHCR report from December 29, 2008, estimates that 18,527 displaced people have returned to Kosovo since the 1999 conflict.

Contributing Factors: Independence

13. (C) Among our chief contacts in the area of returns and among most Kosovo Serbs, there is a consensus that Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008 and the resulting political fallout discouraged this community and reduced the number of returns. At meetings on December 15 and 18, UNHCR, UNDP, and DRC representatives all agreed that independence was the chief factor reducing the number of returns in 2008. Michael Possmayer, outgoing mission head at DRC, told us on December 16 that Kosovo Serbs were now making decisions on whether to return by factoring in Kosovo's new status. Notwithstanding the Serbian government's continuing efforts to deny the legality and effect of Kosovo's independence, many Serb returnees, especially those going to rural areas or Albanian-majority towns, know that they are returning to an independent state and decide accordingly.

Jovanovic Case

14. (C) Another event affecting returns in 2008 was the March 12 arrest of Momcilo Jovanovic, a Kosovo Serb from Peja/Pec municipality, who was apprehended during a "go and see visit" to his home. Jovanovic was placed under home detention in the Serb-majority village of Brestovik (Klina municipality) for several months and is now believed to be back in Serbia. The arrest came as a surprise and led DRC and UNHCR to suspend "go and see" visits for several months afterwards. Possmayer considers the case another key factor in driving down the number of returns in 2008. (Note: Jovanovic was

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detained by UNMIK DOJ on the basis of war crimes indictment that is apparently still being investigated; UNMIK DOJ head Bob Dean, who will move over in February to be EULEX War Crimes Prosecutor, informed us recently that EULEX will eventually take up the case. End Note.)

MCR Woes

15. (C) Further complicating matters has been the underperformance in 2008 of the Kosovo Ministry for Communities and Returns (MCR). The replacement of Minister of Returns Boban Stankovic by Alexander Rasic in October 2008 (see reftel) may help improve the MCR's performance in 2009, but the ministry has little to show for its efforts over the past year. Since Rasic took office, we and other international partners, including UNDP, have helped advise him to deal more effectively with MCR issues. Rasic has concentrated on spending unspent funds from FY 2008 and planning his FY 2009 budget, as well as correcting serious problems with MCR returns projects begun in 2008. Former Minister Stankovic's poor relationship with key donors resulted in lengthy delays in starting construction of returnee housing in the village of Laplje Selo (Pristina municipality) and other locations. Rasic and his colleagues in the Independent Liberal Party (SLS), which participates in the Kosovo institutions and has two ministers in the current government, have told us that improving conditions for Serb communities already here may be a better way of promoting returns in the long run than returning as many people as possible in the short run.

Strong Will Remains

16. (C) While there is a consensus that independence has decreased returns, there exists an equally strong belief among our contacts that displaced Kosovo Serbs continue to possess a strong will to return. UNHCR Kosovo mission head Herrmann Sturwald told us on December 15 that UNHCR's contact with displaced persons' associations in Serbia and elsewhere revealed continuing significant interest in returns. On December 18, UNDP official Kim Vetting agreed with UNHCR's assessment and added that interest in RAE (Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian) returns was also strong, and could become more of a

focus in the future. We discussed an upcoming RAE returns project in Istog/Istok municipality, in which RAE from refugee camps in Montenegro would be returned to a rebuilt settlement in the spring of 2009.

Comment: Sustainability Key

17. (C) The list of factors working against returns to Kosovo, particularly by Serbs, is both long and well-known. Security worries, unemployment, property-related issues, and other factors have been a problem since 1999. On top of these, certain factors in 2008, ranging from independence to problems at the MCR and the increased politicization of the Kosovo Serbs' status by the Serbian government, have helped contribute to the meager number of returnees in the past year. It is too early to tell whether 2009 will be more "normal" when it comes to returns. The longer-term impact of Kosovo's independence on returns is not yet known. It has been almost a decade since the summer of 1999, when the vast majority of those still displaced departed Kosovo. While we agree that there is still a strong desire to return among many of the displaced, we should also note that this has been the case almost as long as those displaced have been gone. The overall number of returnees has been low, averaging around 2,000 per year since 1999. We still believe that individual returns, as opposed to larger organized projects, have proven more sustainable and successful. We also agree with Minister Rasic that improving conditions for existing communities is becoming more critical in maintaining the Kosovo Serb population, particularly south of the Ibar river. We will continue to assist him, in coordination with our international partners, in an effort to make 2009 a more successful year in returns than the one which has just ended. K Aidanow